

Iowa Commission of Latino Affairs

Commissioners' Bios *(Written by commissioners)*



Alejandro Pino, Commissioner since September, 2011

Alejandro Pino was born in Lima, Peru to a Peruvian father and a mother from the United States. At the age of 10, his family made the difficult decision to leave Peru and move to the United States. Much of this decision was due to the political and economic instability of Peru, particularly during the time of the Shining Path terrorist group. While in the United States, Mr. Pino has lived in Dubuque (IA), Maquoketa (IA), Bettendorf (IA), and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He graduated from Loras College (Dubuque, IA) with degrees in International Studies and Political Science. After graduation, he worked at Jefferson Davis Associates in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, as a Marketing Research Analyst. After gaining valuable experiences as an Analyst, his alma mater (Loras College) called him to become the International Recruiter and Head Men's/Women's Tennis Coach. During this time, Alejandro expanded the college's international student population and improved the tennis programs. After three years, he became the Director of Intercultural Programs, with the responsibilities of advancing the college's diversity initiatives and supporting students of diverse backgrounds.

He was fortunate to serve on many Presidentially appointment committees and was co-creator of DuTalk, a civil discourse program. Additionally, Alejandro was a founding member of IDEA (Impacting Diversity through Educational Alliances). Above all, Alejandro's most cherished moments involved his work with students and with the community. His most profound accomplishment was being presented with the Father Naumann Award, an award presented by students to a faculty or staff member that has provided exemplary service to students. In late 2011, Alejandro relocated to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he currently works at Premier Staffing Incorporated. His passion continues to be ensuring all people are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of background or situation. He is honored to be part of the Latino Affairs Commission.



Jeannette Martinez, Commissioner since May, 2016.

Jeannette Martinez was born and raised in Puerto Rico, she moved to Iowa after graduating High School (Ramon Power y Giralt) in Las Piedras, PR.

She has an Accounting Degree, and has also achieved an Associate's Degree in Administration Specialized in Law Office. Jeannette completed her education at Iowa Central Community College in Fort Dodge, IA where she resided for 20 years before moving to Clive, IA in 2015. While in Fort Dodge Jeannette worked for Electrolux Home Products, Citizens Community Credit Union, and Schnurr & Company, LLP; she volunteered for The National Guard, and The Alzheimer's Association.

Jeannette currently works as an Accountant for The Vroman Group CPA, in West Des Moines, IA.



Juan Rodriguez, Commissioner since May, 2012

Born on a small farm in rural Colombia, Juan Rodriguez was the thirteenth child of fourteen. He and his parents and siblings grew coffee beans, corn, beans, bananas, strawberries, grapes, sugar cane, and pears, as well as raising dairy cows, pigs, chickens, and horses. While most of what was grown and raised was used to feed his large family, Juan also helped sell their products at a market in nearby Gacheta, which was four hours from Bogota. Juan was called "John" or "Johncito" by everyone and didn't become known as Juan until moving to the United States.

Juan's mother taught him how to read and write before he began school at age six. He walked 2.5 miles barefoot to and from school along a horse trail. He put his shoes in a backpack so they didn't get dirty or wear out. Juan's school was atop a mountain, next to a huge statue of the Virgin Mary.

Childhood offered Juan little opportunity to be a child. While at school, he was responsible for sweeping the school with tree branches with leaves woven through them. After school, he took

care of the cows at home. Week-ends promised more work; Juan had to fish to help feed his family. Poverty was a fact of life. Juan's family ate beef just once a week, with his mother dividing one or two pounds among her fourteen children. He did not eat all day at school, as he was too embarrassed to take food from home in Colombia's classist society.

Juan's mother offered him as a virtual slave to a friend of hers when Juan was just nine years old. He was sent to work for a woman in another town, having to clean out cow intestines from slaughterhouses and scrape dead calves out of dead, pregnant cows. He was also made to sell ice cream bars in the town plaza and polish college students' shoes. Juan's nights were spent sleeping on the floor of his "employer's" house. This gig ended when Juan escaped and was able to return home.

Juan's fondest childhood memories include inventing his own guns, getting electricity in his house in 1985, a 12 inch black and white TV in 1988, and racing bicycles as part of a team. He trained daily and was chosen to compete in Bogota.

Juan was a diligent student and used to get up at 4:30am to walk to school, which started at 7am. Despite his father passing away during his last week of high school, Juan was one of just three of the fourteen children in his family who finished high school. He was one of just two to finish college, even though his mother passed away when he was in college. Juan paid for his school books by working in his brother's bakery and graduated from college with a degree in computer technology in 2002. Juan's daughter, Maria Paula, was born in 2000.

With military service mandatory in Colombia, Juan was sent to the Amazon jungle with the Army right out of high school. He lived in the jungle for a year and obtained the rank of lieutenant.

Pay was just living wages even for professionals in Colombia and for twelve years Juan anxiously waited the day he would get an appointment for a visa. One of his older sisters was a U.S. resident, then citizen, who applied for her siblings to come to the U.S. Finally, in 2003, Juan's appointment for a visa came through and was approved.

One month later, Juan stepped on American soil for the first time. He stayed with his sister in Chicago for a while, then came to Des Moines to visit, liked it, and stayed. Not knowing a word of English, Juan began his English language journey by taking classes in Illinois. He later purchased a course on an MP3 player, which he listened to while working as a janitor for Drake University. Juan moonlighted at Gloria Mendez Insurance Agency, becoming a partner. He resigned from Drake in 2005 when his son, Juan Pablo, was born.

Learning English has been a continual process over the years – listening to 98.3 FM for six years, watching TV and movies, and studying for his insurance license, which he was granted in 2007.

Juan began working for Allied Insurance, as well as Viking Insurance as a partner in the Gloria Mendez firm. 2008 saw Juan opening Diversity Insurance and transferring his business to Diversity. He branched out, selling for Travelers, Victoria, Mexican Insurance, Viking Insurance Foremost and some other companies.

Major turning points in his life were becoming a U.S. citizen in 2008 and being recognized as the top minority business in Central Iowa. The insurance business was good, with Diversity Insurance ranked in the top ten in sales for Victoria, the top 30 for Allied, and the top producer for Viking. Diversity has continued to rank among the top three agencies in sales in the nation for the last three years.

Juan met his future wife, Laura Montalvo, in 2009 and become a father for the third time in 2010 when his son, Oscar, was born. Juan and Laura purchased the restaurant Fiesta Cancun in 2010 and renamed it 5 de Mayo, then purchased Spanish-language radio station (call letters KDLF) in 2011.

In his leisure time, Juan enjoys spending time with his family, reading, race cars, and studying politics. Juan attributes his success and zest for life to an insatiable thirst for knowledge and drive to “always learn.”



Marlu Abarca, Commissioner since May, 2016.

Marlu Abarca is a one of the newest and youngest commissioners to join the Iowa Commission on Latino Affairs. She is a Grinnell College graduate with a passion for education and social justice. She volunteers her time serving on several Boards of Directors, including Al Éxito, a state-wide Latino mentorship program and DREAM Iowa, a network of Iowa Dreamers. Ms. Abarca is a recent graduate of the Latina Leadership Initiative of Greater Des Moines, class of 2016. She resides on Des Moines, IA with her cat, Monkey. Ms. Abarca is finishing a National Service term with Iowa College Student Aid Commission and is currently piloting a Bilingual Storytime for Des Moines Public Libraries. She hopes to return to graduate school in the near future.



Michelle Reuss, Commissioner since 2016

Michelle Reuss has a BA/Finance and Economics from Baylor University and more than 20 years' experience in the Banking and Financial Management field with the last 3 years being with Community 1st Credit Union in Washington, IA. Michelle is also a Certified Financial Counselor with CUNA and teaches financial classes to educate about the importance of credit and money management.

When Michelle joined the Credit Union she realized a large portion of the members were from the Latino Community and she proactively hired three Latino employees, to make their banking at C1st a more rewarding experience. While helping one of her employees gain citizenship in the US, she recognized a need for immigration loans and is supporting her staff with Forensic Document Training from the IRS to further assist in the immigration process.

Through Michelle's guidance, the Credit Union provides financial education/management and credit building. This gives the Latino members access to home loans, Auto, and personal loans using their ITINS creating a stronger Community ties.



Sal Alaniz, Commissioner since July, 2009

Sal is an active member of the Iowa community, serving in many economic, community development and community service roles, including:

- Chair, Human Rights Commission-City of Mt. Pleasant
- Former Chair, Diversity Action Team-Healthy Henry County Communities, Henry County, Iowa
- Former Advisory Member, Strategic Planning Committee, Mt. Pleasant School District
- Advisory Board, Office of Minority & Multicultural Health, Dept. of Public Health, State of Iowa
- Advisory Committee, Targeted Small Business, State of Iowa
- Entrepreneurial Committee, Mt. Pleasant Area Alliance
- Tri-State Entrepreneurial Committee, Quincy, Illinois
- American Red Cross, Des Moines Iowa County Chapter - DSHR and DAT Disaster

- Services, Instructor, Volunteer, and Strategic Planning
- Center for Cultural Initiatives, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. Resource for community needs and to non-profit organizations
- Grow Henry County - community and economic development blog.

Sal shares his history with Iowans:

Grandpa Alaniz was born in Santa Elena, Guanajuato (a rural farm in the state of Guanajuato, close to the state of Michoacan) on February 24, 1900. His full name was, Matias Alaniz Zaragoza. His parents were, Francisco Alaniz and Heginia Zaragoza. His father died in some freak accident working on the railroad rails somewhere in Texas in the early 1900's.

Grandpa Matias was 13 when he got the nickname "La Coneja" (The Rabbit) because he was a fast runner as he was trying to stay alive during the many revolutionary uprisings taking place in Mexico during his youth. At nearly age, he and some of his older siblings started to join their father in Texas, but did not migrate permanently there until he married grandmother a few years later. At 19 he married grandmother. She lived with his mom sometime before grandpa and she migrated to the states in the early 20's. They first worked as farm workers someplace in Michigan. They worked from sunset to sundown. Grandpa's oldest brother Santiago, died there from heat stroke. Grandma also lost her first born named Benigna; probably as a result of the intense physical labor they all did picking fruit in heaven knows what circumstances. They then migrated to Chicago probably in the early to mid 20's.

Grandpa became a U.S. Citizen in 1938. However, when they went to Michigan at first, they were there under a government program that welcomed immigrants to work the farms.

Salvador Alaniz Sr. and Frank, his brother, served in WW II and Raul during the Korean War. Sal Senior served on an Admirals ship in the Pacific fleet, and in communications. Frank was wounded toward the end of the war and was briefly held as a prisoner in Germany in some field improvised warehouse. He and his fellow colleagues were left behind and cared for by a German Dr. and a few German soldiers. As the allied forces were approaching, a battalion of German soldiers were retreating as they approached this warehouse. The retreating officer gave an order to the German doctor in-charge to shoot all of the injured solders and retreat as well. Thankfully, the doctor ignored the order and left all of the soldiers behind, and thus were shortly rescued by the allied troops. Frank was flown to some island to recover from his wounds and was still there when the end of the war was officially over.

In the meantime, Grandma told the story how she remembers all the jubilation when they heard the war was over, people were singing and dancing in the streets but she could not because she still had no word of her son. She had received the first telegram about how Frank was missing in action.

The Orozco family, grandparents, came to U.S. at a young age as well and ended up in Horton, Kansas before migrating to Chicago, Illinois in 1940 due to an accident at work. Bernard Lopez Orozco and Maria Chavoya Orozco. 10 children. Mother, Thomasa was the seventh born. In Chicago, my parents met.